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86-year-old Missourian dedicates life to fellow veterans

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. – On Dec. 7, 1941, the attacks on Pearl Harbor immediately affected millions of Americans. It put into motion a chain of events that would set the course of a then 16-year-old boy.

Unbeknownst to Jim Whitfield, of Independence, that day would be the start of a lifetime of service for his country and fellow veterans. For over seven decades, Whitfield has worked both in and out of uniform to preserve and protect the honor of service members. He started as a Navy quartermaster during World War II. Upon his return from the war Whitfield began volunteering with the American Legion and has done so for 66 years. Currently he works for the Missouri Military Funeral Honors Program.

Whitfield knows exactly where he was when he received the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, thrusting America into an already raging war. The surprise strike against U.S. Naval forces further solidified this young man's impression of patriotism and duty.

"I was sitting on the curb in front of my dad's restaurant, of all places to be, but that's where I was," said Whitfield. "I heard it on the radio. It was Sunday, lunch was over, and I was out sitting on the curb and there it was. It was shock and surprise."

Like many Americans, the news of the invasion painted a blurry picture of what it meant to the future of the country.

"I didn't grasp the news," said Whitfield. "Maybe it was because I was 16 years old. I think the magnitude of it really didn't hit anybody, right at that moment anyway."

What was clear for Whitfield was a sense of duty. At the age of 17, Whitfield joined the Navy in the middle of the war. In June 1943, two weeks after he graduated high school in Warrensburg, he became a seaman recruit. Out of his senior class of 54 students, 26 out of 27 boys served in the military.

"It was just expected that you serve your country," said Whitfield. "It was just the mood of the country at the time."

Whitfield eventually became a petty officer second class in his nearly four years in the Navy, serving in both the South Pacific and North Atlantic theaters.

"I was in all of the oceans really," said Whitfield. "Most of the time I was on North Atlantic convoy duty on a troop ship carrying troops for the reinforcement of Europe. I was among the first, probably the second wave, of reinforcements at Normandy."



As a quartermaster, Whitfield assisted with the navigation of the USS Gen. G. O. Squier.

“I was actually on the same ship 33 months,” said Whitfield. “It was a surface ship and I was very fortunate I was on a troop-carrying ship, therefore I did hit the United States fairly often to pick up troops. It was a quick turn-around. You weren’t in port very long.”

While at sea, Whitfield and his shipmates were well aware of the danger they were in, but he said he didn’t dwell on the potential peril.

“At night our ship would shake from the depth charges that our escort ships were dropping, so you knew there were subs around there pretty close,” said Whitfield. “We were fortunate our convoy was never hit. I knew there was a possibility we would be torpedoed, I knew that, but I never thought about it. I guess it was just the duty, and that was it.”

After the war, Whitfield returned to Warrensburg to attend college. He felt compelled to continue his service to his country and honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice. He became an officer with the local American Legion Post 131 and in 1947-1948 he arranged to be at the train station to meet patriots coming home to their final resting place.

“We had a lot of casualties in World War II,” said Whitfield. “The Families had a choice to have their Family member buried in a military cemetery overseas or bring them home. That was my first real experience dealing with that. Fifty-two different times I met a train that had a body on it. It was just a matter of respect that some of us meet them.”

Whitfield said trains from Kansas City would arrive at the station at 1:10 a.m. and trains from St. Louis would come in at 5:10 a.m. As a college student, he would adjust his sleep and study schedule to accommodate the fellow veterans coming home one last time.

“In the process I also attended most of those services, and as part of the Legion I actually folded and presented the flag way back when,” said Whitfield. “Of course in a small town I actually knew some of them. Most of them were older than me, but I knew them from working in the restaurant and delivering milk when I was younger.”

Whitfield said that those experiences in the late 1940s indirectly led him to what he does today with the funeral honors program. As the western area supervisor he works full time to provide funeral honors in 50 counties.

Though it may seem commonplace now for veterans to receive recognition for their service, it hasn’t always been the case. It wasn’t until 1999 that Missouri led the way to ensure its veterans were properly honored at their burial.

“In the mid 90s it came to veterans’ attention that Families were not receiving honors because it was not available,” said Whitfield. “I actually wrote the resolutions that the American Legion adopted urging the Missouri legislature to establish a military honors program.”



In May of 1999 Whitfield came on board ahead of the program and has been with funeral honors ever since. He said that the program, which is under the office of the Missouri National Guard adjutant general, now gives full honors, which includes presenting and folding the flag, playing Taps and firing three volleys.

“The federal government didn’t have anything at that point,” said Whitfield. “Later on congress directed the Department of Defense to provide honors for all veterans with two people—to fold the flag and play Taps.”

All of the personnel with the funeral honors in Missouri are National Guardsmen. Whitfield’s office coordinates with the National Guard, certified veteran service organizations and the active duty component to present at funerals when requested by the Family through the funeral director.

“Most states are not in the position to give full honors like we do,” said Whitfield.

On average, Whitfield said about 800 funerals a month statewide receive funeral honors. During the program’s first year about 4,000 funerals were attended. Currently they provide honors to over 9,000 veterans a year in Missouri. He added that since the program’s inception in July 1999 they have provided honors for more than 105,000 Missouri veterans.

“It’s very rewarding,” said Whitfield. “Sure it’s a state job, but I don’t look at it as a job. It’s rewarding—the fact that we are actually honoring those who have served and knowing some of them have served during the same period of time I did even though I don’t know them personally.”

Whitfield said his office gets many notes of appreciation from loved ones expressing just what the service meant to them and how they know their Soldier would have appreciated it.

At the age of 86, when most people have long since retired, Whitfield said he has no plans of slowing down. In addition to his full time job, he is also extremely active in other service organizations including the American Legion, Boys State and Veterans of Foreign Wars.

“I just don’t want to retire I guess,” said Whitfield. “It’s not on my radar right now. I’ve been doing veterans stuff all my life. I’ve seen a lot and I’ve been very blessed that I’ve had the energy to do it.”

With the countless experiences Whitfield has encountered in his lifetime it would be understandably difficult to pinpoint the most momentous event that remains seared in his memory—but he can.

“There have been many of them, but the first one that comes to mind was the announcement of V-J Day,” said Whitfield. “We were one day out of Panama Canal with troops from Europe headed to Japan.”

With tears swelling in his eyes and a slight quiver in his voice Whitfield recalled the brief moment of joy that will forever be etched in his mind. At the time about 3,300 troops were on his ship and headed into harm’s way.



“That was a happy day,” Whitfield simply stated. “At that time we had about a million Soldiers at sea headed to Japan. The guys had been in Europe three years and never been home, and were headed to Japan. So, that would be one of the key ones right there. You can see it’s emotional.”

Though he doesn’t remember the captain’s words exactly, Whitfield does recall that once the words, ‘the war is over,’ were uttered the guys didn’t have a chance to hear what their captain said after that.

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Before sending out his Funeral Honors Team to present full military honors to a fellow World War II veteran, Jim Whitfield (center) briefs Sgt. Jason Ledbetter (left) and Sgt. Amy Brown on the precise techniques of folding the American flag. (Photo by Jennifer Archdekin/Missouri National Guard)